Writing about coronavirus

Words and phrases to use when writing about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the UK.

Table of contents

1. Using this guide
2. Clinically extremely vulnerable
3. Coronavirus and COVID-19
4. Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
5. Deaths and COVID-19
6. Furlough
7. Local lockdowns and restrictions
8. Lockdown
9. Long COVID
10. New variants of the coronavirus
11. NHS Test and Trace
12. Outbreak or pandemic
13. Pre-coronavirus and pre-lockdown
14. Quarantine
15. R number
16. Self Employment Income Support Scheme Grants
17. Self-isolation
18. Shielding
19. Social distancing
20. Spread
21. Support bubble
22. Vaccines and vaccinations
23. Waves

Using this guide

The terms on this page refer to words and phrases commonly used in publications published on the Office for National Statistics website. This page is updated regularly, but other sources may be more timely.

Please see the latest guidance for each country of the UK.

The full GOV.UK coronavirus style guide provides more detailed guidance and definitions of terms and phrases relating to coronavirus (COVID-19).
Clinically extremely vulnerable

Clinically extremely vulnerable refers to people who are at high risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

These people have been told directly by their GP or hospital that they are “clinically extremely vulnerable”.

They are classified separately because they were asked to follow specific guidance for clinically extremely vulnerable people. For certain periods of time, this included advice to “shield”.

Use “people who are clinically extremely vulnerable”, with the whole term in lower case, including the link to the NHS website.

Only use “people at high risk” where needed and alongside “clinically extremely vulnerable”.

Do not use “clinically vulnerable people” when you mean clinically extremely vulnerable; this term relates to a different set of people.

You can find more information about the definition of “clinically extremely vulnerable” in our Coronavirus and clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people in England bulletin.

Coronavirus and COVID-19

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause disease in people and animals. They can cause the common cold or more severe diseases, such as COVID-19. COVID-19 refers to “coronavirus disease 2019” and is a disease that can affect the lungs and airways.

When talking about coronavirus, you should:

- use “coronavirus (COVID-19)” the first time that you refer to it in each section of your article or bulletin
- use just “coronavirus” for all subsequent uses in a section when referring to the virus and the coronavirus pandemic in general
- use “coronavirus” in lower case unless at the start of a sentence
Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was introduced by the UK government to support employers and businesses as part of its response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This allowed all UK employers with employees on a Pay As You Earn (PAYE) scheme to designate some or all employees as “furloughed workers”. See Furlough for more information.

The scheme allowed employers to access government support to continue paying 80% of their furloughed employees' salaries, and potentially protect their employees from redundancy.

The first phase of the scheme finished at the end of June 2020 and a second flexible phase ran between June and October 2020. The scheme was extended into a third phase from November 2020 to March 2021.

Use upper case and, if you use the CJRS acronym, make sure you introduce the acronym in brackets after the full name on first use in each section.

Deaths and COVID-19

We need to be clear when talking about deaths and coronavirus (COVID-19) whether the disease was the underlying cause of death or not. Use the phrases “deaths caused by COVID-19” or “COVID-19 deaths”
only when referring to deaths with an underlying cause of death as COVID-19. Only use the phrase “deaths due to COVID-19” when referring to how it is written on the death certificate, but try to avoid the phrase “due to” where possible (see Words to watch).

Use the phrase “deaths involving COVID-19” when referring to deaths that had COVID-19 mentioned anywhere on the death certificate, whether as an underlying cause or not.

**Furlough**

Furlough generally means a temporary leave of absence from work. The employee remains employed with the business and on the payroll but does not work. This term was used during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to refer to employees who had been furloughed as they could not work because of lockdown restrictions.

The UK government provided financial support to employers and businesses through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, also known as the Furlough Scheme. This allowed businesses that had been severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic to furlough their staff. When furloughed, an employee received 80% of their current salary for hours not worked, up to a maximum of £2,500.

Under the more flexible second and third phases of the Furlough Scheme, employees could either stop working completely or work reduced hours while furloughed.

**Local lockdowns and restrictions**

Local lockdowns or restrictions apply to a particular local authority or local council area. Each country of the UK introduced its own set of restrictions to manage the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in local areas when the rates of infection began to increase after the summer of 2020.

**England**

In England, a three-tier COVID Alert Level system was introduced on 14 October 2020 to help control the spread of coronavirus in local areas. This included Tier 1 (medium), Tier 2 (high) and Tier 3 (very high), with increasing restrictions depending on the alert level for the area. This system was replaced by national lockdown restrictions for England on 5 November 2020.
Use “Tier” when referring to a specific COVID Alert Level category in England but use lower case “tier” when referring to multiple categories or in general use.

Wales

In Wales, local restrictions were introduced in local authority areas with a high or rising number of cases to help reduce the spread of coronavirus. These local lockdowns were introduced from September 2020 for varying amounts of time depending on the local area. These measures were replaced with the firebreak restrictions on 23 October 2020, and these were then replaced with national restrictions on 9 November 2020.

Use the phrase “local restrictions” when referring to local measures used in Wales.

Scotland

In Scotland, a five-tier COVID-19 local protection levels system was introduced on 2 November 2020. Local areas that were categorised as protection level 0 had the lowest levels of restrictions, while protection level 4 areas had the highest levels of restrictions.

Use “protection level” in lower case when referring to categories of restrictions in Scotland. These protection levels are sometimes also referred to as “tiers” in lower case but try to be consistent.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, a national set of restrictions was introduced on 16 October 2020 for a period of four weeks. Prior to this, local restrictions were in place for certain areas.

See Lockdown for information on the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020.

Lockdown

Lockdown is the shutting down of all non-essential activities to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). It can include:

- people being asked to work from home or stay at home if they cannot work remotely
- closure of all non-essentials shops, pubs, bars, restaurants and hospitality
- closure of gyms, leisure centres and local council services
- travel restrictions on entering or leaving an area or country as well as travelling abroad
- banning of mass gatherings such as sports or music events as well as restrictions on weddings and funerals
- restrictions on mixing with other households, both inside and outside
- curfews and early closures

There have been various national and local lockdowns applied in the different countries of the UK, with varying restrictions and for different time periods.

The first national lockdown was introduced on 23 March 2020. This formed the basis for each nation’s stay at home guidance. The lockdown restrictions were lifted on different dates in each of the countries of the UK.

Stay at home should be written in sentence case in line with GOV.UK house style.

A second four-week lockdown was introduced in England only on Thursday 5 November 2020, ending on Wednesday 2 December 2020.

See Local lockdown and restrictions for more detailed information on the restrictions in each UK country’s local authority or local council areas.

**Long COVID**

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) defines long COVID as “signs and symptoms that develop during or following an infection consistent with COVID-19, which continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis”.

When referring to long COVID:

- do not capitalise the word “long” unless at the start of a sentence
Long COVID is sometimes referred to as post-COVID syndrome. For consistency, use long COVID.

**New variants of the coronavirus**

There are different variants of COVID-19 that have emerged throughout the coronavirus pandemic. In June 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that Greek letters would be used to name different variants, instead of referring to them by the country they originated in.

Letters will be used to refer to variants of concern and variants of interest, and there is a full list of names available on the [WHO website](https://www.who.int/). 

**NHS Test and Trace**

Each country of the UK introduced its own test and trace service to help stop the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). These were:

- **NHS Test and Trace service for England**
- **Test Trace Protect service for Wales**
- **Test and Protect service for Scotland**
- **Test, Trace and Protect programme in Northern Ireland**

Unless specifically referring to services in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, use “NHS Test and Trace” or “NHS Test and Trace service”.

Do not use:

- “Test and Trace”
- “Test and Trace service”
Outbreak or pandemic

Use the term “pandemic” when referring to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic rather than “outbreak”. You should always use “coronavirus” before “pandemic” on the first use in a section. Once you have introduced this term, you can use just “pandemic” in other instances in that section.

A pandemic is where a disease is prevalent over a whole country or the world and so is more accurate than outbreak, which refers to increases of a disease in a particular time or place. The World Health Organization classified COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Avoid using the phrase “pre-pandemic”. See Pre-coronavirus, pre-pandemic and pre-lockdown.

Pre-coronavirus and pre-lockdown

“Pre-coronavirus” can be used for talking about time periods before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Avoid using the phrase “pre-lockdown” as this is not clear and may lead to misinterpretation of the data. The “start” of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic may also be subjective or have a different meaning or impact for different topics. Be as clear and specific as possible when referring to time periods.

When referring to the period before the coronavirus pandemic, use:

- the exact dates if you are talking about a specific and clear time period or event, for example, “before the national lockdown started on 23 March 2020”
- the month, such as “February 2020” if you are talking about the first full month before the effects of COVID-19 were seen in the UK
- “early 2020” for a more general time period relating to the months before the coronavirus pandemic
Rather than using “pre-lockdown”, either state the month you are talking about or use “before the national lockdown in March 2020” to make it clear what date you are talking about.

EXAMPLE

The level of GDP output remains below the levels seen in early 2020, before the effects of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic were seen.

Quarantine

“Quarantine” refers to the period of managed hotel quarantine that people had to undergo after travelling from a country on the banned travel list (also known as the red list).

If a person returned to the UK from a country that is on the amber list of countries, they had to self-isolate at home or in the place they were staying for 14 days.

See “self-isolating” in this style guide for people who have:

• symptoms of COVID-19
• a positive COVID-19 test
• been in contact with someone who has tested positive
• travelled from a country not on the banned travel list but have to self-isolate

R number

R number refers to “reproduction number”, which is the average number of secondary infections produced by a single infected person.

If R is greater than 1, the epidemic is growing.

If R is less than 1, the epidemic is shrinking.
If \( R \) is equal to 1, the total number of infections is stable.

Use “reproduction number (R number)” and define it as “the average number of secondary infections produced by a single infected person” the first time you use it. You can refer to “R number” after that.

Do not use:
- “R Number” with both capitalised
- “r number” with both lower case

**Self Employment Income Support Scheme Grants**

The Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) was made up of four taxable government grants for self-employed individuals. These grants were lump sums rather than paid as a monthly salary. For those that qualified, the grants were based on average profits from the past three tax years.

Use “Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)” for the first use of the term in each section. Refer to it as “SEISS” after that.

Use “first grant”, “second grant” and “third grant” to refer to the different stages of the grant.

SEISS was different to furlough and should be referred to as “support for the self-employed”, “self-employed support” or “self-employed support grants”.

The term furlough should only be used to refer to those who were employed by an employer and met various qualifying dates and criteria, for example, on a Pay As You Earn (PAYE) roll by 30 October 2020.

**Self-isolation**

People typically had to self-isolate if any of the following reasons applied:

- they had symptoms of COVID-19
• they had a positive COVID-19 test
• they had been in contact with someone who tested positive
• they had travelled from a country not on the banned travel list but had to self-isolate

Use “self-isolation” (noun).

Use “self-isolate” or “self-isolating” (verb).

Include the link to the GOV.UK guidance pages for the first mention in each section.

Do not use “quarantine”, “in quarantine” or “quarantining” unless referring to quarantine after travelling from a country on the banned travel list. See quarantine.

**Shielding**

Shielding was introduced in the UK in March 2020 at the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The shielding guidance advised those most at risk of serious harm from COVID-19 to stay at home to protect themselves. It applied to people, including children, who are clinically extremely vulnerable to developing serious illness if they are exposed to COVID-19 because they have a particular serious underlying health condition.

Specific shielding guidance for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was published. People were asked to stop shielding in August 2020 and to instead follow the national rules and restrictions.

Refer to “those who were shielding” and the “shielding guidance”.

**Social distancing**

Social distancing refers to the measures taken to prevent the spread of a contagious disease by maintaining a physical distance between people. Social distancing was introduced in March 2020 to slow the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) by reducing the number of times people come into close contact with each other. The general rule was to stay two metres apart from those outside of your household.
Use lower case and refer to these as “social distancing measures” when talking about the introduction of the rules.

**Spread**

Use “the spread of COVID-19” or “to avoid spreading COVID-19 from person to person”.

Do not use “to fight COVID-19”. You should also not use “transmission of COVID-19” as transmission is a medical term.

**Support bubble**

A support bubble is a close support network that can be formed between a household of any size and a household with either:

- only one adult
- one adult and one or more people who were under the age of 18 on 12 June 2020 in the home (known as a single-adult household)

Once a support bubble is formed, the households can act as a single household and can have close contact with each other.

**Vaccines and vaccinations**

Vaccines are substances that stimulate the immune system into producing immunity to a specific disease.

Vaccination is the act of administering a vaccine into the body.
Immunisation is the process whereby someone becomes protected against a disease after they have been vaccinated. It is often used interchangeably with vaccination. For consistency, use vaccination.

Vaccines against the coronavirus (COVID-19) should be referred to as “COVID-19 vaccines”.

When discussing COVID-19 vaccines in general, use “a COVID-19 vaccine” rather than “the COVID-19 vaccine”. This is because there are multiple types of vaccines and so we need to make it clear we are talking about all vaccines.

Only refer to a specific type of COVID-19 vaccine by name if you need to make the distinction between the vaccine types clear. There are currently three COVID-19 vaccines being administered in the UK:

- Moderna
- Pfizer-BioNTech
- Oxford-AstraZeneca

When discussing vaccine doses, refer to them as “the first dose” and “the second dose”.

EXAMPLE

The Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was approved for use in January 2021.

More than 23,000 people have received the first dose of their vaccine.

The number of people receiving their vaccinations has doubled.

Vaccination centres have been set up across the UK.

Waves

Use “COVID-19” and lower case to refer to different waves of the coronavirus pandemic. For example, “the first wave of COVID-19”.

View the full GOV.UK coronavirus style guide for more COVID-19 terms and phrases.
We are constantly improving based on research and best practice. Any significant changes to our guidance are available on the Updates page.